Use Common Sense to Spot a Con

It is not always easy to spot con artists. They are smart, extremely persuasive and aggressive. They invade your home through the telephone, computer and the mail. They advertise in well-known newspapers and magazines, and they come to your door. They are well-mannered, friendly and helpful – at first.

Most people think they are too smart to fall for a scam. But con artists rob all kinds of people – from investment counselors and doctors to teenagers and senior citizens – of billions of dollars every year. Cons, scams and frauds disproportionately victimize seniors with false promises of miracle cures, financial security and luxury prizes.

One easy rule to remember: If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Don't let this happen to you:

§ The phone rings and the caller tells you that you have won a new car. In order to claim the prize you

need to mail a check to cover the taxes and delivery of the car. Weeks later, the phone rings again. You learn that the original prize company has gone out of business. The caller tells you not to worry because their company has purchased the assets of the defunct company. All you need to do now is send another check to the new company to cover the costs of the legal transactions and immediate delivery of the car. The check gets mailed, but the prize never arrives.

§ A mail offer, newspaper, magazine or television ad catches your eye. It promises a quick cure for cancer, arthritis, memory loss, back pain or other ailments. "It's an absolute miracle," one testimony reads. "I feel a million times better." You mail your check for a six-week supply of this miracle cure and wind up with a jar of Vitamin C, placebos or, even worse, pills or tonics that have not been medically tested and could worsen your condition or react negatively with the prescription medication you regularly take.

You Can Protect Yourself

- § Never give a caller your credit card, phone card, Social Security number or bank account number over the phone. It is illegal for telemarketers to ask for these numbers to verify a prize or gift.
- § Beware of 900 numbers. Remember, if you call a 900 number to claim a "prize," you end up paying for the call. Make sure you understand all charges before making the call.
- § Take your time and shop around. Do not let an aggressive con artist pressure you into making a decision. Demand information in writing by mail, get a second opinion or ask your family, friends and neighbors what they think about certain offers.
- § Stay informed about current scams in your area. Contact your Attorney General's office, Commonwealth's Attorney, the Better Business Bureau or local consumer affairs office for more information.
- § Remember, you have the right, the ability and the power to say no! If the caller on the other end of the phone makes you wary, be assertive and end the conversation. Cons know that the longer they keep you on the phone, the greater their chance of success. They often prey on the trusting, polite nature of many older people or on their excitement over getting a supposed prize or bargain. By saying "no" and hanging

up the phone, you can prevent a crime from happening.

Be a Wise Consumer

- § Don't buy health products or treatments that include a promise for a quick and dramatic cure. Don't automatically believe testimonials, imprecise and non-medical language, appeals to emotion instead of reason or a single product that promises to cure many ills.
- § Look closely at offers that come in the mail. Con artists often use official-looking forms, formal language and bold graphics to lure victims. If you receive items in the mail that you did not order, you are under no obligation to pay for them. You are free to throw them out, return them or even keep them, free-of-charge.
- § Beware of cheap home repair work that would otherwise be expensive. The con artist may do only part of the work, use shoddy materials and untrained workers, or simply take your deposit and never return. Never pay with cash. Never accept offers from drive-up workers who "just happen" to be in the neighborhood. If they're reliable, they will come back after you check them out.

If Someone Rips You Off

- § Report con games to the police, your city or state consumer protection office, district attorney's office or a consumer advocacy group. Don't be embarrassed. Even the most intelligent people have been fooled by the pros!
- § Call the National Fraud Information Center at (800)-876-706, or visit its web site at www.fraud.org for current fraud alerts.

Avoid Scams & Fraud

HANG IT UP!

- § Your telephone is the easiest way for a con artist to get your money. Hang up the telephone if someone calls you and wants to sell you something.
- § Never give out any personal information such as credit card numbers, bank account information, Medicare numbers or driver's license number over the telephone. In addition, never pay for a prize over the telephone.
- § Never agree to any offer until you have seen it in writing. If you are interested in buying a product over the telephone, ask the company to send you the information in the mail. A reputable company will be happy to send you the information.
- § Virginia law restricts telemarketers to making calls between 8 a.m. and 9 p.m. and prohibits them from calling consumers who have asked not to be called. Remember, HANG IT UP!

TEAR IT UP!

§ Seniors receive numerous sweepstake offers informing them that they have won a prize. That

Source: National Crime Prevention Council

prize could be a product, service or even a large sum of money. A letter, sweepstakes notice or other sales promotion asking you to call for more information may actually be a trap to lure you into high-pressure sales tactics over the telephone. If the sweepstake is legitimate, you should not have to send any money, give out any financial information or buy anything to win that prize.

- If you are told you must act immediately, or the offer is only good for that day, hang up the telephone.
- Be very careful of flashy envelopes or personalized letters. Companies spend millions on mailings in order to appeal to consumers. If you do not think it is legitimate, TEAR IT UP!

DO NOT OPEN IT UP!

- Not only do seniors have to Ş be careful of door-to-door sales representatives offering free products and services, seniors have to be careful of professional con artists and criminals who want to take their money.
- Do not let anyone in your house to show you new products or allow them to leave the product with you to test.
- If someone comes to your door that you do not know, DO NOT OPEN IT! If they are persistent, call the police and ask them to check on your house.

Common Scams

Home Repair Scams

- Pavers
- 9999999 Landscapers
- Roofers
- Painting Home Exterior
- Window Replacements
- Pest Control
- § Mortgage/Refinance

Sneaky home improvement contractors are remarkably practiced at talking people out of large sums of money in advance and then disappearing before the job is completed. Victims often say, "But he seemed so nice."

Beware of contractors who show up at your front door in unmarked vans or trucks who claim they have left over material from a job that they can give you for a low price.

- Always check to see if the repair needs to be done before you sign a contract.
- Always sign a contract. Be sure to § read it carefully before you sign.
- Get three estimates on any home improvement you are planning.
- Ask for credentials and licenses and check them out with the Office of Consumer Affairs of the Better Business Bureau.
- § Ask for a business card.
- Ş Take down the license plate number of the contractor's vehicle.

- § Never let a contractor pressure you into purchasing a product or service. No good deal is good only at that time.
- § Never let a contractor into your home without someone else being there.
- § Be sure your contract states that the contractor will pay all sub-contractors and that cleanup is included in the contract price.
- § Never pay cash or pay in full until the job is completed and you are satisfied.

REMEMBER: Your home is your largest investment. Be careful who you hire and always CHECK THEM OUT!

Health Claims

Medicine men peddling their magical cures are not a thing of the past. Health "quackery"- fraudulent claims and misrepresentation of a health/medical product or deviceis still in practice today, promising unfounded benefits to seniors. There are products on the market that advertise a "cure" for ailments, such as arthritis, that greatly impact the senior population. These products appeal to seniors by claiming to have a cure or to end pain seniors may be experiencing. Seniors may be quick to fall prey to these products because they would like to believe there is a cure for ailments associated specifically with aging. Check with

your doctor before purchasing anything that claims to be a "cure."

Always remember, if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.

Estate/Long Term Care Planning Scam artists looking for easy money sometimes prey upon consumers, especially senior citizens.

Seniors are urged to invest their life savings in order to prepare for the future. Consumers often are pressured into purchasing when they are not aware of what they are buying. Scam artists insist that consumers sign a contract that guarantees to eliminate the delay and high cost of having a will probated in court.

Beware of insurance policies that seem too good to be true. The contract is a prepaid legal plan that includes the preparation of a living trust. The money that consumers pay the scam artist to invest and use to prepare a trust sometimes ends up in the criminal's pocket.

The best advice for seniors is to consult an attorney before signing contracts about investments or wills.

REMEMBER: This is your income and investment, make sure a professional invests it.

Extra Income Scams

In this day and age, we could all use some extra money. Many seniors stretch their income to cover even the barest of necessities.

Knowing that some seniors are in need of supplemental income, scam artists are very anxious to sell false hope at a cruel price. Frequently, seniors read advertisements that promise them an opportunity to make extra money. The deceptive offers promise easy cash for little work. These ads are often found in the help wanted section of the paper. The catch; however, is that the person may need to make an initial investment of money in order to make money.

- § Do not pay for information about any work-at-home offer.
- § Find out in writing what you must do in order to benefit from what is promised in the ad.
- § Make sure you have all of the facts before you send anyone money.
- § To protect your financial security, ALWAYS be suspicious and scrutinize any person offering a quick way to make money.

Unordered Merchandise

What do you do when you open your mailbox one-day and find a package that you do not recall ordering? Attached is also a bill for the merchandise.

You are then left with the question, "Am I responsible for the merchandise that I did not order?"

Many seniors are concerned that their credit will be damaged if they do not purchase the unordered merchandise.

Legally, you are not responsible for merchandise that you did not order.

Door-to-Door Sales

The amount of time that it takes to decide to purchase merchandise varies among consumers. Many are often easily pressured into purchasing merchandise presented by door-to-door salespeople. Seniors may make purchases without careful consideration because they are being pressured. Often, in the end, the consumer is left with unwanted merchandise and a bill.

State and federal laws protect consumers from door-to-door sales pressure tactics. Consumers have three business days to cancel and reevaluate their purchase without penalty under the law. The law is only applicable to purchases of \$25 or more, and be aware that Saturday is considered a

business day. This cancellation must be in writing and delivered or sent to the address on the bill.

The best advice is to carefully consider each purchase.

If the merchandise is as good as the salesperson claims, the company can stand an investigative check.

ALWAYS contact your local Better Business Bureau to check out a company from which you are considering making a purchase.

Land in the Sun

Purchasing a retirement home and land takes careful planning and investigating.

Land developers sometimes offer seniors an opportunity to purchase and build their dream home. The fraudulent operators take advantage of seniors' financial security and eagerness to purchase such a dream home.

It is strongly recommended that seniors consult a lawyer or real estate agent before signing any contracts or making any deposits. The Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development administers a law that affects mail order sales of land of more than 40 or more unimproved lots.

Before you purchase land, contact the proper state agency where the land is

located or HUD, Office of Interstate Sales Registration, (202)-708-0502.

Travel Scams:

You pick up the telephone or open your mail and suddenly you have "won" a vacation. If this happens, you may be the next victim of a con artist who will take your money and give you nothing in return. Those "free" trips and special offers may be scams that target consumers, especially senior citizens.

- § DO NOT put your name in a "draw barrel" unless you are familiar with the company name on the form.
- § Be skeptical if someone calls you and says you have been chosen, selected or have won a trip. If they ask you to send money to claim your prize, HANG UP!
- § If someone offers you a special low-cost trip, do not be pressured into making an immediate decision. Check the company out with the Virginia Office of Consumer Affairs.
- § If someone offers a special deal, ask what the price covers.
- § Be sure to check cancellation policies and refunds.
- § Get the complete details of the trip in writing before paying.
- § Make it a priority to consult someone that you trust for financial advice before sending any money or giving credit card information out on the telephone.
- § Do not believe that the offer is legitimate because you cannot find

complaints against the company.

- § Do not be pushed into making a decision over the telephone, take your time and review the information when they send it to you.
- § Do not hesitate to complain if you do not get value for your money.
- § For additional information, call the American Society of Travel Agents, Consumer Affairs Department, at (703)-739-8739.

Remember: If a deal sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

Automobile Scams

Secret Warranties

Hundreds of items often are covered by secret warranties, but vehicle owners end up paying for the repairs because they do not know how to get them done for free. Few mechanics are aware of more than three or four covered items, so even if they wanted their customers to know all about them, they do not have the information. Check with the manufacturer of the part to see if it is covered under warranty before authorizing the repair.

Low, Low Prices

Low-priced ads for auto repairs and services may not always include things like labor, extra parts and service contracts. Make sure that the service or repair includes all parts, materials and labor costs. If the

mechanic states that additional work is needed after they have begun the service or repair, check with another mechanic and get another estimate on the additional repair.

Hearing Aids

Hearing aids and batteries can be a big expense, with each hearing aid costing as much as \$2,000. If you are fitted improperly, you could end up with a costly device that you will never use.

If you are not careful, an aggressive sales representative, using hard-sell tactics, could persuade you to buy the wrong hearing aid. It is essential before buying a hearing aid that your hearing problem is diagnosed properly, since a hearing loss may be a symptom of a more serious medical condition.

A hearing aid seller is required by federal law to inform you that it is in your best interest to have a medical exam by a licensed physician. Once your doctor confirms that you need a hearing aid, buy one from a seller that is qualified to fit hearing aids.

Tips to buying hearing aids:

- § Do not sign anything a seller asks without reading it over carefully.
- § Be sure to deal with a seller who will take the time to resolve fitting and volume adjustment problems, and teach you how to use the device.
- § Get a written estimate of the total cost of the hearing device.
- § Never pay cash. Use a check or credit card so you can stop payment if necessary.

 Source: Virginia TRIAD